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ABSTRACT

Some of the reasons for including a study of "la Francaise" in the French curriculum are: the increased participation of women in French society, Franco-American dialogue on feminist issues, and the long tradition of women writers in France. American feminists have visited France, and major changes in French women's rights and development of feminist organizations have occurred since 1970. A variety of strategies for the classroom are suggested. These include: (1) a historical survey, for which much material is available, and surveys of women's role in the family, education, the world of work, and "causes celebres," such as pacifism, abortion, or rape; (2) notable French women and the extent to which they were representative of or unusual for their periods in history; (3) the press (women's writing and women's exploitation); (4) politics (the process of gaining legitimacy, the Napoleonic Code); and (5) the arts (women's contributions and women's portrayal). A list of print and nonprint resources and the text of the "Code Napoleon" concerning marriage and divorce are appended. (MSE)

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INTRODUCING LA FRANÇAISE TO THE CLASSROOM

by Margaret Collins Weitz

A few years ago, it might have been necessary to indicate why this topic should be included in the curriculum. Now, however, the importance of the subject of French Women is recognized: it has much to commend it to teachers of French language, literature, and civilization. This article will offer some specific, practical suggestions on how to introduce la Française, to the classroom.

Women's growing participation and involvement in French society constitutes, assuredly, one of the most prominenet features of that country today. French women have obtained more rights in recent years than they had in preceding centuries. Studying la Française can be of great interest to American students. It can help them become more familiar with another country's culture and languages; the aim of the President's Commission, the Simon Report and a current national concern.

Comparison is an obvious way of analyzing women's role and status. French women share much with their American counterparts. Nevertheless, there are significant differences. Too often American students have but a limited awareness of the actual situation of women in France; a situation that is in direct contrast with their image of la femme objet, Brigitte Bardot, etc. Generally American students are not familiar with what I call the Franco-American dialogue on feminism.

In the Beginning there was The Second Sex (1949). Then the works of American feminists Betty Friedan and Kate Millett were translated into French. They themselves visited France. The uprisings of 1968 brought renewed impetus to women's issues

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and revendications. Since the early 1970's there have been major changes in French women's rights. Three significant legislative victories have done much to ameliorate women's situation there: the rights to birth control (1974); the right to abortion (under certain conditions, 1974; permanently passed in 1979); and a bill making it possible to divorce under less restrictive conditions (1975). French women played a major role in passing this legislation. Now the task remains of apprising all women of their newly won rights and making these bills more responsive to women's needs. It is easier to pass legislation than to change les mentalités. Mme Yvette Roudy, Ministre des Droits de la Femme, has made educating women about their rights one of the major tasks of her Ministry.

The MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) was founded during the early seventies. Other feminist groups appeared during this period: there were manifestos and demonstrations. Feminist magazines flourished and the more traditional women's magazines such as Elle devoted additional space to feminist issues. (Elle sponsored the Estates General of Women in 1970 and 1971).

Those who teach literature are familiar with France's tradition of eight centuries of women writers--from Marie de France and Christine de Pizan (the first woman to live by her pen) to Helisenne de Crenne, author of the first sentimental novel, Les Angoysses. . . (1538) and Mme de La Fayette, author of the first French classical novel, La Princesse de Clèves

(1678) to Marguerite Yourcenar, (can one say Mme l'Académicienne?), first woman elected to the French Academy. More recently, the problems of l'écriture féminine, have been studied. But there are fewer courses concentrating on or devoting considerable time to the status of la Française and her role in French society, either at the introductory or advanced level. Yet here is a rich vein to be exploited. There are many studies, texts and resources available to teachers. (See list appended). It should be added, that, while it is not possible to discuss Francophone countries, what has been suggested about the progress and the problems of French women prevail in those areas as well. For example, the women's movement is very active in Quebec. (See my "An Introduction to the Québécoise," Contemporary French Civilization, vol. 5, no. 1, Fall 1980). Recent books such as Les femmes antillaises (1979) reveal that the general view of women there is coloured by folklore and tourist brochures: it contrasts sharply with reality.

Examining the situation of women in France or in French-speaking cultures has an obvious pedagogical advantage. Students learn more quickly and respond more favorably to topics that interest them, topics that relate to their lives. In one way or other all students are affected by women's changing roles in society. Girls and boys alike must consider whether to marry or not (without Panurge's friends to counsel them); whether to have a family; whether dual careers are possible.

Having suggested some of the reasons why one should introduce

la Française, to the classroom, let us now consider how this can be accomplished. These suggestions hold for the development of entire courses or for sections of a course where this topic would add an additional dimension and enrichment.

1) Historical Survey: The traditional historical approach is probably the most obvious approach for intermediate and advanced levels: it has much to commend it. It is also the easiest premier pas for someone who has not treated this topic before. The condition of women in French society from the medieval to the modern period is studied. Many documents and treatises, manifestos and memoirs are available. A somewhat narrower focus would entail studying the "History of French Feminism," again tracing the chronology. It was only from the Revolution on that women considered themselves as a class. Prior to that time there were the "exceptions." Several histories and anthologies available include Histoire du féminisme français du moyen-âge à nos jours (2 vols, 1977); Histoire des féminismes français (1978) and Regard sur les Françaises (1983).

The MLA sponsored Teaching about Women in the Foreign Languages was published ten years ago by the Feminist Press. Nevertheless it offers useful course outlines and helpful bibliographies. Reflets de la femme (1973) and Les Femmes en France (1974) are specifically designed for American students. The latter is unfortunately out of print; it is particularly well done. Ultimately, however, materials chosen will be adapted to accomodate the class level and student needs, as is done for other topics.

Much latitude is possible in dealing with the subject of women in France.

II) Themes are another way to structure a course. The family, education, and work are just a few of the areas that lend themselves to the study of la Francaise. The French Review and Contemporary French Civilization have featured a number of articles with useful references and bibliographies on these topics. Other possible themes include:

A) Causes celebres. A course can focus on famous events and issues. In the late Middle Ages there was a lengthy Querelle des Dames. Pacifism was the central issue of Helene Brion's trial in 1917. Her Voie feministe was reissued in 1978. The complete proceedings and relevant documents for the trials of Bobigny (over abortion) and of Aix (on rape), defended by Choisir, have been published by Gallimard. These trials also offer views into the workings of the French legal system, which differs from the American system.

B) Notable French Women. A similar approach may be taken here. After reading the writings and/or biographies of outstanding women, discussion would center on to what extent they represent their age; are they typical or perhaps atypical. This is important for focusing exclusively on these women gives a somewhat one-sided view of women's situation in general. Well known contemporary women deal with problems that apply to many. Evelyne Sullerot and Andree Michel have written on work; Gisele Halimi and Simone

Veil are active in politics.

C) Press. This is an obvious way of examining French women's situation, both past and present, for their writings have played a major part in achievements and advancements. In contrast, women are frequently manipulated in la grande presse. Publicity exploits them, as Sois belle et achete: la publicité et les femmes (1968) and Mon corps, ton corps, leur corps; le corps de la femme dans la publicité (1978) document. Once aware of the issue, students are quick to spot their favorite examples of exploitation.

Popular publications such as Elle, Marie-Claire and Cosmopolitan as well as feminist magazines and reviews offer much to analyze. Less known resources include Pénélope, pour l'histoire des femmes, publication of the Groupe d'Études Féministes de l'Université de Paris VII et du Centre de Recherches Historiques de l'École de Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Citoyenne, the monthly of the Ministère des Droits de la Femme is available for a modest subscription and Gazette des femmes, published by the Canadian Conseil du Statut de la Femmes is available without charge. The Ministry of Women's Rights also publishes many free guides and pamphlets such as Guide des Droits de la Femmes and Guide de la femme seule. In recent years a number of French publishing firms have brought out special collections devoted to women. There is also des femmes, a publishing firm directed by women that publishes a review, Des femmes en mouvement, and the works of women authors, foreign as well as French.

D) Politics. This is often a difficult subject to cover in class: students do not always respond to what they consider to be dull, abstract issues. In studying the long and difficult time French women have had to "come of age," to literally become majeures, and examining key documents such as the "notorious" sections of the Civil Code one is virtually assured of a lively class discussion. This topic has led some students into exciting investigations, including the career of the man reponsible for the Code, Napoleon.

E) The Arts. Films are yet another area where French women have made, and continue to make, major artistic contributions. Marguerite Duras, Chantal Ackermann, Diane Kurys, and Agnès Verda are well known. Other noted women film makers include Yannick Bellon, Maria Meszaros and Coline Serreau. Popular chanteuses frequently write songs or sing songs about women. Anne Sylvestre has produced Pour des chansons de femmes. En portées (1979) is a collection of feminist songs; some written by well-known recording artists.

The pun in the title En portées (disposed or inclined to; emportées, feminine plural of carried away or prevailed upon) indicates that while women's issues are indeed serious, French women may have been more successful than their American sisters in perceiving and exploiting humour, sometimes using l'esprit gaulois. (Placards carried in recent demonstrations bore slogans such as "viol de nuit: terres des hommes."). A good resource is Le Sexisme ordinaire (1979), with a preface by Simone de

Beauvoir. This was a rubric started in Les Temps modernes in 1974. Initially flagrant examples of sexism were simply quoted. Gradually, however, sexism was examined as it appears in books, films, essays, and reviews. (The work sexisme made its first "official" appearance in the Robert dictionary of 1978). The many editorials Benoîte Groult write for F Magazine as well as her very popular Ainsi soit-elle provide useful material, as do the works of Christiane Rochefort. Her Ma vie revue et corrigée par l'auteur offers many amusing sections which lend themselves readily to class use. Examples of her "ready-made" genders are le rein; la reine; le mal, la malle; le curé, la curée; and le bouc, la bouche. The perennial problem of genders if humorously highlighted. And of course, one should not forget cartoons, particularly "les femmes" of Claire Brétécher.

In addition to texts and films, there are recorded materials to help introduce la Française. "Les Femmes" is a single cassette Larousse issued. Livres parlants are a series of tape recordings produced by the publishing house des femmes mentioned earlier. These tapes feature contemporary women authors reading their own works and the works of other women writers read by actresses, noted scholars, and feminists. With Judith G. Frommer I co-authored Femmes et Métiers (1978), a series of recorded interviews with French women who work outside the home which have accompanying student booklets.

In conclusion then, the opportunities for introducing la Française to the classroom are extensive. The limitations are

those of the instructor who is unaware of the rich potential of this topic, and possibly, of the importance of the role of women in French society today.

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An exhibition of photographs and texts on "Thirty Notable Contemporary Women" I organized is available (for shipping charges only) from the French Cultural Services, 972 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021; (212) 570-4400.

CODE NAPOLEON 1804 *

Titre V Du Mariage (Livre I Des Personnes)

Chapitre VI "Des Droits et des Devoirs respectifs des Epoux"

212. Les époux se doivent mutuellement fidelité, secours, assistance.

213. Le mari doit protection à sa femme, la femme obéissance à son mari.

214. La femme est obligée d'habiter avec le mari, et de le suivre partout où il juge à propos de résider: le mari est obligé de la recevoir, et de lui fournir tout ce qui est nécessaire pour les besoins de la vie, selon ses facultés et son état.

217. La femme, même non commune ou séparée de biens, ne peut donner, aliéner, hypothéquer, acquérir, à titre gratuit ou onéreux, sans le concours du mari dans l'acte, ou son consentement par écrit

223. Toute autorisation générale, même stipulée par contrat de mariage, n'est valable que quant à l'administration des biens de la femme.

224. Si le mari est mineur, l'autorisation du juge est nécessaire à la femme, soit pour ester (intenter, poursuivre) en jugement, sois pour contracter.

Titre VI Du Divorce

Chapitre Premier "Des Causes du Divorce"

229. Le mari pourra demander le divorce pour cause d'adultère de sa femme.

230. La femme pourra demander le divorce pour cause d'adultère de son mari, lorsqu'il aura tenu sa concubine dans la maison commune.

Chapitre IV "Des Effets du Divorce"

295. Les époux qui divorcent pour quelque cause que ce soit, ne pourront plus se réunir.

296. Dans le cas de divorce prononcé pour cause déterminée, la femme divorcée ne pourra se remarier que dix mois après le divorce prononcé.

297. Dans le cas de divorce par consentement mutuel, aucun des deux époux ne pourra contracter un nouveau mariage que trois ans après la prononciation du divorce.

* The Code Napoléon codified the inferiority of women in French society. Only in the past decades have all these discriminatory provisions been eliminated.

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE TAPES INCLUDED IN FEMMES et METIERS:

Judith G. Frommer Margaret Collins Weitz

"Corinne Monod, sécretaire" - a 25 year old secretary from Marseilles. Her interview describes the studies required to become a secretary in France. She also discusses the differences between people from different regions of France.

"Danielle Delfour, dentiste" - a 30 year old woman who became a dentist because her fiancé was studying dentistry. She has decided not to have children because they would interfere with her career.

"Jacqueline Pelleport, médecin" - a young woman who has a rather unusual specialty: pediatric radiology. She is unusual also because she does does not like taking money from patients.

"Anne-Marie Bailly, infirmière" - a nurse who has had a varied, interesting career, from working in a Parisian clinic to running a hospital on a rubber plantation in Cambodia to assisting a plastic surgeon in Paris.

"Jeanine Clisson, pharmacienne" - a pharmacist who, while explaining her own work, explains the aspects of French pharmacies which distinguish them from their American counterparts.

"Annette Vincent, gardienne" - a young woman who begins her interview by clarifying the differences between "concierges" and "gardiennes." This conversation gives the listener a good idea of the mentality of working-class French.

"Betty Baed, coiffeuse" - while describing her trade, using the appropriate specialized vocabulary, this young woman reveals personality characteristics which are probably typical of hairdressers in all countries.

"Josette Benoite, femme politique" - an assistant mayor of a large town in France, talks about why she became a communist, and why a change in social structure is necessarty to correct the injustices which exist today.

"Elisabeth Hoche, ingénieur" - this engineer talks about her education and her work as a consultant. She discusses the problem of being a woman in a predominantly masculine profession.

"Dominique Dupuis, directrice commerciale" - a marketing director of a small, family-owned factory. This interview includes useful vocabulary, and reveals some differences between French and American business.

"Marie-Claire Bulté, professeur" - a physics teacher in a private school in Paris talks not only about her experiences, but also about the problems facing French youth today.

"Simone Truchon, fonctionnaire" - a civil servant, only a few years from retirement, explains the intricacies and advantages of working for the government.

Cassette Masters $5.00/ Student Booklets $1.00

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